

The SS Gairsoppa



The only known photo of the *Gairsoppa*, taken between the wars in her peacetime paint scheme including the distinctive striped funnel of British India Co. She was built in 1919, had a gross tonnage of 5,257 and was driven by a single screw powered by a triple-expansion steam engine. For her final voyage, she had a crew of 84 - made up of British officers and Indian 'Lascar' ratings - and two D.E.M.S. (Defensively Equipped Merchant Ship) gunners.

Ship Details

- Originally named War Roebuck August 12, 1919 and changed to Gairsoppa at completion on October 17, 1919.
- Measurements: 412 ft long (399.3 registered), 52.2 ft beam, 285. ft depth, 25 ft 3 in draught, and weight of 5,257 tons.
- Single screw (propeller) driven by a three-cylinder triple-expansion engine built by the company Palmers.
- It was rated at 517 Nominal Horsepower (NHP) and achieved 11.7 knots (13.46412 MPH) on test trials.

Peacetime Service

- The Gairsoppa was registered in Glasgow, Scotland.
- On April 29, 1930 it was grounded at Fulta Point in the Hooghly River in West Bengal, India.
- Toward the end of 1940 the Gairsoppa departed from Calcutta and was bound for the UK. First stop was in January 1941 was in Cape Town South Africa.
- Arrived off the shores of Freetown in Sierra Leon where they waited to join a convoy to the UK.
- Departed Freetown on January 30, 1941 along with 30 merchant ships headed for Liverpool, England.

The Adjusted Heading

- Heavy weather slowed the convoy and the ships fuel was low.
- As result they detached from maritime convoy SL64, and slowed their speed to 5 knots to conserve coal.
- They also changed their course by heading for the nearest sheltered anchorage in Galway Bay (WW2 neutral Ireland).

The Attack

- Occurred during the Battle of the Atlantic.
- A German Focke-Wulf Fw 200 aircraft circled the Gairsoppa at 0800 the morning of February 16th.
- German submarine U-101 located the ship later the same day at 1800 hrs but was delayed in their attack due to heavy seas.
- U-101 fired a spread of two torpedos at 2328 hrs and then a third at 2332 hrs, all of which missed.
- At 0008 hrs of the 17th, U-101 fired a fourth torpedo which hit the starboard side of the Gairsoppa.
- The ship caught fire and was fired upon again at 0020 by another torpedo (as a coup de grace), but it missed.

After The Attack

4,700 Meters Deep – Half A Mile More Than The Titanic



Position where *U-101* sank *Gairsoppa*
in the *Western Approaches*

What About The Crew?

- The crew abandoned ship in three lifeboats and watched the Gairsoppa disappear almost 20 minutes after being hit.
- The lifeboats became separated in the heavy sea. Two were never seen again. The third one had 23 occupants.
- The remaining lifeboat commanded by Second Officer Richard Ayres was stocked with drinking water, hardtack (crackers), and cans of condensed milk. Rations were issued but the water was gone after eight days.
- After the first week all but seven men on the lifeboat had died from exposure or drinking sea water. Four more would drown after the boat overturned as it neared the shore.
- A second overturning would claim another. One crew member made it to a large rock but was then swept away by waves. Only the boat commander survived, but four deceased crew members were later found.

Post Survival

- Richard Ayres was awarded the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire and Lloyd's War Medal for Bravery at Sea for his efforts to save his shipmates.
- He received his full pension for nine months while in recovery. Despite injuries he chose to return to the company that had owned the Gairsoppa and continued to sail.
- He would later become a Captain in the Royal Naval Reserve, and superintendent for the cargo company that he had served.

Monuments

- The 11 European officers and other men killed are commemorated on panel 51 of the Second World War Monument at the Tower Hill Memorial in London.



Monuments

- A Chinese carpenter and 69 of the lascars (sailor from India & Southeast Asia) who were killed are commemorated on a roll of honour. One copy is held at Chittagong War Cemetery in Bangladesh, and the other at the Indian Seamen's Home at Mumbai in India.



The Losses

- Cargo included 2,600 tons of pig iron (used for steel production), 1,765 tons of tea (enough for 65% of Britain's population at the time), 2,369 tons of general cargo, a consignment of mail (700+ letters), and 200 tons of silver ingots and coins (destined for the Royal Mint).
- Correspondence between the Royal Mint and the Bank of England in 1941 revealed that it was feared that they were within two months of running out of silver and might have to suspend the minting of new silver coins.
- Of the 86 crew members onboard, only one survived.



The Recovery

- In 1989 the UK government invited companies opportunities to salvage Gairsoppa's silver bullion.
- Deepwater Recovery and Exploration Ltd submitted the only bid the government received.
- In 2011 they awarded a contract to US company Odyssey Marine Exploration to find and salvage the 7,000,000 ounces (200 tonnes) of silver from the Gairsoppa along with another similar ship which was sunk in 1917 by a German U-boat.



Salvors inspecting some of the silver recovered from *Gairsoppa* in 2013



How Much Silver Recovered?

- In July 2012 it was reported that Odyssey had recovered 1,400,000 ounces (40 tonnes) of silver in 1,203 ingots (approx 1,000 ounces per). Odyssey was to keep 80 percent of the value and 20 percent would go to “His Majesty's” Treasury.
- On 23 July 2013 it was reported that Odyssey had recovered another 1,574 ingots, totaling almost 1,800,000 ounces (51 tonnes).
- This increased the total salvaged to 110 tons: a record for both the amount of precious metal salvaged, and depth from which it was raised.
- This represented 99% of the insured bullion that Gairsoppa was carrying. Uninsured silver belonging to other nations that was lost was not reported as being included in the salvaged silver.

What Happened To The Silver?

- 462 of the original silver ingots minted at the Royal Mint's Bombay location, were made available to the purchasing public.
- September 2013 some of the silver was delivered to the Royal Mint location in Wales and used to mint coins.
- April 2014 the Royal Mint announced that it would strike 20,000 commemorative 1/4 ounce coins from the silver, each with a face value of 50 pence, but priced at £30.
- Much of the public available ingots was used by the Sunshine Mint to create commemorative 10 troy ounce silver bars and 1 troy ounce coins.

Commemorative Gairsoppa Shipwreck Silver Bar (10 oz.)



Only 462 of these 2,792 1,000+ oz. shipwreck silver bars have been distributed to the public, making them truly authentic, coveted rarities. However, the remaining bars have been melted and re-minted as 10 oz.

commemorative bars, offering

a more affordable – but equally exciting – way for collectors and investors to capture an authentic piece of the S.S. Gairsoppa. Each of these gem uncirculated 10 troy oz. silver bars is minted with the same .999 pure silver as the original 1,000+ oz. ingots recovered from the shipwreck site. Each bar is stamped with a certified S.S. Gairsoppa Shipwreck Silver Seal on its obverse, with the image of the S.S. Gairsoppa ship imprinted on its reverse to commemorate the ship and crew and identify the origins of the silver.

Royal Mint



Sunshine Mint Examples

- Type 1 & Type 2 silver bar identifiable by no date on the bottom of the original.
- Each 10 oz silver bar is uniquely serialized. Rounds are not numbered.



References

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